

DEFINING A PROFESSION: SOME INITIAL PROBLEMS

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ABSTRACT

Professor Danner looks at the literature of the professions for insight into the relationships among librarians and other information professionals in the workplace, and to see how increasing reliance on technology in the work of all information professionals (and their clients) will affect roles and relationships in the future. He draws upon examples from American law librarianship to show current trends and developments.

INTRODUCTION

Information technology's impacts on the workplace apply with specific force to special librarians and other information professionals, and bring to the forefront questions about the future of librarianship as a profession. Some of these questions are explored in this paper with examples from the work of law librarians in the United States.¹

It has always been difficult for library users to understand precisely what librarians do, or why some of the people working in libraries pointedly identify themselves as professional workers, while the work of other library employees is not considered to be professional. We now live and work during a time of massive change in the ways that information is produced and distributed, and in how people locate and use what they need. As ever greater amounts of networked information become directly accessible to computer users, the continued relevance of library training and the library itself are increasingly called into question.² As a result, librarians face the burdens of explaining not only their claim to professional status, but why they are needed and what they will be doing in a new information environment that seems to require fewer intermediaries between individuals and the information they seek.

Consider law librarianship as an example. In the United States, the traditional defining characteristics of a legal information professional³ would have included a graduate

¹This paper is part of an ongoing project on the impacts of information technology on law librarianship and legal education. The portions here are provided as background for an address in Perth, Western Australia, in October 1997. For previously published segments, see Richard A. Danner, Facing the Millennium: Law Schools, Law Librarians, and Information Technology, *Journal of Legal Education*, March 1996, at 43; Richard A. Danner, The Effects of Information Technology on Law Librarianship: An American Perspective, *Law Librarian*, December 1996, at 203.

²See, e.g., Jerry D. Campbell, Choosing to Have a Future, *American Libraries*, June 1993, at 560 (noting that librarians now can see themselves being replaced by "a new breed of information professional who lacks our historical perspective and commitment to service:").

³In the papers in this series, I use the term "legal information professional" to include both law librarians and others in professional positions

degree in library science, perhaps a law degree, and employment by a law library. Because nearly all legal information professionals were law librarians, credentials and place of employment were enough to define the field, differentiating the law librarian both from librarians working in other types of libraries and from other law library employees. In 1997, the information needs of law schools, courts, law firms, and other organizations are met not only through their law libraries, but by staff from the computing department, which might be found in any of several places within the organization. The library itself is likely to have at least some staff, professional or otherwise, with technological backgrounds and training outside librarianship. Whether employed by the law library or not, the technologists do not think of themselves as librarians. Yet, like librarians, they work with information and assist users in locating and accessing the information they need.

In the future, will information needs in law and other areas continue to be met primarily by librarians, or will technologists responsible for facilitating users' access to digital information take over the primary role? Do the changes in the information environment require a whole new breed of information professional? Can librarianship provide the foundation for this new profession? To begin to answer these questions, this paper considers the work of librarians and other information professionals from the perspective of the literature of the professions.

THE INFORMATION PROFESSIONS

Librarians, computer technologists, and several other professional groups together make up what Andrew Abbott has called "the information professions." For Abbott, "groups that provide others with information [occupy] a general information area of the system of professions....[A]t any given point of time these groups may control diverse portions of this general area in unique ways.... But in general, information professionals help clients overburdened with material from which they [sic] cannot retrieve usable information."⁴ Richard O. Mason notes that, regardless of their area of specialization, all information professionals are mediators and have one purpose in mind: "to get the right information from the right source to the right client at the right time in the form most suitable for the use to which it is to be put and at a cost that is justified by its use."⁵

Abbott finds that, historically, there have been two general types of information professionals: those working with qualitative information (an area generally occupied by librarians, and others) and those with quantitative information (the domain of cost accountants, management engineers, statisticians, operations researchers, systems analysts, and others).

working to serve or support users of legal information. Questions of nomenclature pose tricky and emotional issues for librarians. Library futurists Walt Crawford and Michael Gorman have decried librarians' adoption of such generic labels as "information specialist," on grounds that "Every white-collar worker, professional or not, could be called an information specialist," and that "It is a bland, meaningless term that weakens the position of the people who carry it." Walt Crawford & Michael Gorman, *Future Libraries: Dreams, Madness & Reality* 105-106 (1995).

⁴Andrew Abbott, *The System of Professions: an Essay on the Division of Expert Labor* 216 (1988). Abbott's book does not fully envision the extent to which developments in desktop computing and network communications would affect the information professions since his book was published, but his comments on the information area and his analysis of relationships among information workers remain insightful.

⁵Richard O. Mason, What Is an Information Professional?, *Journal of Education for Library and Information Science*, Fall 1990, at 122, 125 (italics in original).

Sometimes, distinctions among the information professions are expressed in terms of differences between the content of information (the domain of librarians) and the technologies used to communicate or access information (the domain of technologists). The content/delivery distinction makes information professionals in both areas uneasy because of its potential limitations on their activities. From a librarian's perspective:

This distinction is false, misleading, and dangerous. It is *false* because content is meaningless until communicated; thus content and access technology are inextricably linked. It is *misleading* because it suggests that roles may be clearly confined based on this distinction. It is *dangerous* because it removes from our control some of the most important tools we have to do our fundamental job: connecting people with the information they need.⁶

And technologists are also concerned about content. The director of a university program in information systems management noted recently: "Librarians do have one quality IS [information systems professionals] should emulate: a focus on information content."⁷

At one point, it may have been easier to differentiate librarians and other information professionals on a qualitative/quantitative or content/delivery dimension.⁸ These approaches are harder to maintain in an environment that is increasingly dependent on networked information and in which it is increasingly difficult to establish clear boundaries between information content and the technologies (such as the world wide web) that provide access to the content and make it useable.

WORKPLACE RELATIONSHIPS

According to Abbott, professions seek recognition from society through claims of exclusive rights, or jurisdiction, in specific areas of work. Claims of jurisdiction can be made by: 1) obtaining powers of licensing and regulation controlling who may perform the work; 2) building a public image associating the profession with the area of work; and 3) competing with other groups in the workplace itself. Because theirs is not a regulated or licensed profession, librarians must assert claims of jurisdiction in the arenas of public opinion and the workplace. Because they are members of only one of several information professions, librarians face competition over their claims of jurisdiction from others working in the same area. This section looks at the librarian's workplace environment in terms of relationships with library users (clients) and other information professionals.

⁶Susan Charkes, Information Technology: Beyond the Toolbox, 86 Special Libraries 265, 266 (1995).

⁷Tom Davenport, Management Agenda: Learning From The TV Set, InformationWeek, Sept. 25, 1995, at 130, 130. Davenport suggests that the two groups have common problems. "Many [librarians] like books more than people, just as some of us prefer computers to humans. Studies ... suggest that bosses of corporate librarians don't have a good understanding of what librarians do. IS types also have that problem. Both librarians and IS people are somewhat passive, waiting for someone to ask for the information they provide." Id.

⁸For librarians, the quantitative/qualitative distinction might not be rich enough to encompass the entirety even of the traditional cultural roles of libraries and librarians: to collect, preserve, organize, and provide access to recorded knowledge and information. See, e.g., Crawford & Gorman, *supra* note 3, at 183.

WITH CLIENTS

Client relationships are central to success in any profession. Like other information professionals, librarians must know their clients well enough to be able to anticipate their information needs and to exercise judgment on their behalf. According to Mason, judgment is enhanced by the information professional's "intellectual empathy" with the client's needs and situation.⁹

Abbott differentiates among librarians on the basis of what clientele they serve, noting that the work of academic and special librarians has generally been in workplaces shared with other professional groups, such as faculties, attorneys, and physicians. One result of the shared workplaces is that for academic and special librarians have long been engaged in *interprofessional* conflicts with other groups in their workplaces. In part, this is because "elite special librarians" have characterized the nature of their work as providing access to information and have emphasized their skills in providing access to useful or relevant information. Abbott sees the emphasis on providing access to information as developing over time into work activities for librarians that conflict with the work of the professionals for whom the information is being obtained:

The special librarians claimed that they knew the sources and means to find material that working professionals didn't have the time (and sometimes the ability) to find. They held further that "what you ought to know to solve a problem" could be better defined by a practical knowledge of what the sources make it possible to know than by a theoretical knowledge of what it is in principle necessary to know.¹⁰

The decision about what information is relevant to a problem's solution "is a central part of the [client's] claim of professional jurisdiction." However, as Abbott notes, "Deciding what is relevant information inevitably embroils the information client and the information professional." Because the "information professions are in some sense specialists in diagnosis [they] ... represent a general threat to all professions," and, therefore, "the information professions are, *by definition*, involved in continuously negotiated and contested professional divisions of labor."¹¹

These sorts of conflicts are likely to intensify as technology becomes more and more important in all workplaces. Recent discussions of the transformational impacts of the Internet and the world wide web on higher education start with library analogies as they anticipate a greater role for individualized approaches to learning supported by library-like services.¹² Some forecast potential conflict between librarians and university faculties as instructional technologies become more important in higher

⁹Mason, *supra* note 5, at 130.

¹⁰Abbott, *supra* note 4, at 223-224.

¹¹Id. In a recent column discussing competition for resources within organizations, Herbert White notes that special and academic librarians "need to understand...that their clients are not only their customers, but also their rivals." Herbert S. White, *The Perilous but Also Opportune Future for Special Librarians*, *Library Journal*, January 1996, at 59, 60.

¹²"[O]ne major reason why the characteristics of the Internet are so compatible with those of universities, is that some of the Internet's most significant capabilities resemble, and dovetail with, the capabilities of university research libraries." Neil Rudenstine, *Remarks at the Harvard Conference on the Internet and Society*, Cambridge, Mass., May 29, 1996.

education.¹³

The point to be drawn from this is that, at least in academic and special libraries, interprofessional conflicts involving librarians are not a new phenomenon, nor are they only of the sort highlighted in recent years involving librarians and information technologists.

WITH OTHER INFORMATION PROFESSIONALS

The greatest threat to any profession's claim of jurisdiction over tasks in the workplace is competition from other professions. Disputes over jurisdiction can be settled in any of several ways ranging from successful claims for full jurisdiction in an area (e.g., the licensing mechanisms that control the practice of law and medicine) to more limited settlement mechanisms that divide jurisdiction over segments of an area of work. Among the common mechanisms for resolving jurisdictional disputes are: *subordination* (e.g., the formal relationship of nursing to medicine) and *division of labor* (e.g., the relationships among architects, engineers, and others in the design of buildings).

Between subordination and division of labor are two weaker and less stable forms of relationships between professions claiming jurisdiction in the same area of work: *intellectual jurisdiction*, in which one profession controls the cognitive knowledge of the area, but shares practice with several competitors (e.g., the relationship in psychotherapy between psychiatry and psychologists, social workers and the clergy); and *advisory jurisdiction*, a "weaker form of control," based on relationships between two professions already possessing independent jurisdictions of their own).¹⁴

Clearly, neither librarians nor information technologists have subordinated the other group, nor in many institutions have they established a formal and stable division of labor. Neither has either group established intellectual jurisdiction over the information area. Rather, there seems to be in place the less stable relationship of advisory jurisdiction, in which the boundaries of the established jurisdictions of each profession are growing increasingly indistinct, leading perhaps to increasing numbers of conflicts of jurisdiction, but as yet to no stable resolution. Abbott points out that an advisory jurisdiction is "the bellwether of professional conflict" and can be "maintained only by constant attention. Indeed, since the public expects professions to solve particular problems, not advise about them, advisory jurisdiction is unlikely to last for a long period." Under advisory jurisdictions, "one profession seeks a legitimate right to interpret, buffer, or partially modify actions another [profession] takes within its own full jurisdiction."¹⁵ As played out in the workplace, this may manifest itself in open battles for turf, but it is more likely seen in requests from one group or the other for improved communications, consultations, and coordination, either made directly to the

¹³See, e.g., David W. Lewis, Traditional Reference is Dead, Now Let's Move on to Important Questions, *Journal of Academic Librarianship*, Jan. 1995, at 10,12.

¹⁴Abbott, *supra* note 4, at 75.

¹⁵*Id.*

other group, or to higher authority in the workplace.¹⁶ It also involves what Abbott calls "treatment substitution," which takes place when "a profession accepts another's diagnoses and perhaps treatments, while claiming to carry them out faster or more effectively than the other." As he notes, this is the essence of the competition between librarians and computing specialists, or between specialists in qualitative and quantitative information, with computer specialists arguing that "since computers can carry out information retrieval much faster than can the other technologies, specialists in the computer area should dominate the information area."¹⁷

CONCLUSION

The literature on workplace relationships among the professions helps in thinking through certain unsettled aspects of librarianship's future among the information professions. One may not wish to carry Andrew Abbott's emphasis on competition for jurisdiction as far as Abbott himself does, but it is certain that the librarian's future relationship with the computer technologist is far from clear at this time. And it is clear that developments in information technology will continue to affect and change the library professional's relationships with clients.

Some analysts have concentrated more on the commonalities among the several information professions than on their differences. As part of a functional approach to the question: What is an information professional?, Richard O. Mason developed the useful insight that, because all information professionals work with objectified information ("extracted from the subjective realm of a mind and captured in some external medium"), they are all "involved fundamentally with technology" and "inevitably concerned with the *means* by which this information is conveyed."¹⁸

It will be of interest in both the near and long terms to observe what kinds of futures librarians and other groups in the information professions create from the presumably growing commonalities in their work. Present evidence indicates that professionals in the information fields are less likely to emphasize commonalities than differences, as they try to distinguish themselves from other workers and to solidify their professional status.

For example, the recent report of the American Association of Law Libraries Special Committee on the Renaissance of Law Librarianship urges opening membership in the association to anyone with an interest in law librarianship or legal information, and indeed, defines the term "law librarian" to include "any individual whose primary career is to work with legal information sources of any type in any way and to provide those sources for use by others," whether or not an individual holds the usual credential of a

¹⁶Herbert White points out that these kinds of strategies might be particularly attractive to librarians. White notes that the 1995 Special Libraries Association Conference featured a program on getting along with computer systems people, then asks whether more computer and technology specialists are invited to speak at library conferences than librarians are asked to speak at meetings of computing specialists. "Does anyone think that computer systems people, or teachers, or professors, purchasing agents, or government officials have meetings on how to get along better with librarians?" White, *supra* note 11, at 60.

¹⁷Abbott, *supra* note 4, at 224.

¹⁸Mason, *supra* note 4, at 124-125.

librarian: the MLS degree.¹⁹ At its 1997 AALL annual meeting, however, the membership voted down a bylaw amendment which would have eliminated professional employment in a law library as a qualification for active membership in the association.

It is also illuminating to sample the growing literature grappling with the future of librarianship or the other information professions. Two recent articles published in American professional journals deal with the future roles of academic librarians²⁰ and the computing profession.²¹ Not surprisingly, the first article focuses on the dramatic changes that information technology has made in the role of the academic librarian, both in the library and in the demands and requirements of information seekers. The second article is concerned with the education of future computer professionals. It argues that new curriculums should emphasize the importance of the computer professional's role as a facilitator. Since this role requires assisting users, education must include more to help computer professionals develop strong social, organizational, and communications skills.

Neither article is particularly remarkable either for its subject matter, or for what it has to say: academic librarians, like others, foresee a future in which technology will continue to create many of the structures within which they work; computer professionals understand that in an environment of disbursed and networked computers, more of their work will be directly with users and will involve ensuring that equipment and applications meet users' needs.

However, it is also not remarkable at this point that neither article makes even passing note of what role *other* information professionals beyond the group under discussion will play in that future environment.

AUTHOR

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¹⁹Toward a Renaissance in Law Librarianship: Report of the AALL Special Committee on the Renaissance of Law Librarianship in the Information Age, in Richard A. Danner, ed., *Toward a Renaissance in Law Librarianship* 3, 14 (1997).

²⁰Mary Lynn Rice-Lively & J. Drew Racine, The Role of Academic Librarians in the Era of Information Technology, *Journal of Academic Librarianship*, Jan. 1997, at 31.

²¹Bo Dahlbom & Lars Mathiassen, The Future of Our Profession, *Communications of the ACM*, June 1997, at 80.